

Foellinger Auditorium: Overcoming Architectural Mistakes

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An architect, John Wellborn Root once said, "The man who does not make mistakes seldom makes anything." He meant that mistakes (in architecture) are to be made and realized, and sometimes they are for the better. Foellinger Auditorium, located in Urbana, Illinois, on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus, provides an interesting example of that quote. A little spark of an idea for a building that would be the university's "center of interest," and also be a part of the Quad, soon grew. And grow it did; for it became one man's next architectural project. Financial problems forced the architect to scale down his designs and to abandon many of his original plans. Moreover, after the building's construction, structural flaws were discovered. But, in spite of budget cuts, and a poor design, today, Foellinger Auditorium is a building of many uses.

Early university planners envisioned a structure that would serve as a center of growth for the university's future campus buildings, as well as for the southern boundary of the Quad. In 1905, the University Board of Trustees approved plans to construct a facility for concerts, lectures, and other events. But, almost immediately, problems arose. The state legislature only approved \$100,000, half of the requested money needed for the project. Clarence Blackall, the architect, had no choice but to build a temporary wall where a backstage area would have been, and abandon plans for a south wing to house the School of Music. The building was named Illinois Auditorium, and later the name was changed to Foellinger Auditorium. Even though these budgetary problems, and later, architectural problems, hindered the growth of Foellinger Auditorium, today it is a very valuable building.

On November 4 and 5, 1907, the auditorium's completion was celebrated with two days of performances and an inaugural ceremony. During those two days, however, an acoustical defect was found. A "fantastic echo" rang throughout the building and dome because of the curvature of the domed ceiling and of the use of sound-reflective materials. Within about ten years, the radius of the dome was changed; therefore, the dome focused sound to a point on the floor, rather than above the audience. Sound-absorbent materials were also attached to the walls. Both alterations made the echo less resounding. Although the full extent of the architect's plan failed to be realized, the auditorium was still a success. Even today, it is a functional building, despite the architectural and budgetary troubles.

Foellinger Auditorium is probably the only building on campus that can "claim a greater distinction as a cultural and entertainment center," according to the university. It has welcomed great historical figures such as John Phillip Sousa, Robert Frost, Duke Ellington, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Maya Angelou, just to name a few. Concerts and recitals, lectures, plays, dramatic readings, debates, and even patriotic meetings during World War I are just some of the activities that have been conducted there over the years. There have also been memorial services, movies, tests and final exams, art exhibits, commencement, and the university president's receptions. There are not very many buildings on the university campus that can serve such a variety of purposes, and have hurdled such problems as the auditorium. Indeed, those architectural mistakes and budgetary difficulties have had no effect on Foellinger Auditorium, for it has triumphed over them and is, today, a very practical building.

One single word can describe Foellinger Auditorium: strong. Foellinger Auditorium displayed strength in achieving its designers' aspiration to be one of the university's centers of interest. It exhibited strength in overcoming both financial and architectural problems. Finally,

the useful building it has become today proves its strength. [From “Foellinger Auditorium, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,” <http://www.foellinger.uiuc.edu/history.htm> (Oct. 9, 2003); Isaksen and Matzdorff, *Report on the Auditorium at the University of Illinois*; Dennis Pillsbury, “Top Ten Architectural Quotes,” <http://www.aiare.org/article.asp?vID=4> (Oct. 17, 2003); University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, *The Dedication of Foellinger Auditorium*.]